

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

The mystical revelations and divine colloquies of these three years culminated in the " spiritual espousals " of Catherine with Christ on the last day of the carnival, most probably, I think, in the year 1366.

By this term, " spiritual espousals," the great mystics clearly mean something different, not in degree but in kind, from what every nun may be said to experience when she consecrates her virginity to Christ. They evidently hold that some chosen souls, after passing through the ways of purgation and illumination, having been tried in much tribulation and mortification, and enlightened by profound meditation upon spiritual things, attain to a state of mystical perfection which they call the " spiritual marriage," in which, by an intellectual vision of Christ in the centre of the soul, they become united to Him in some special and peculiarly absorbing manner, and become, in some sort, one thing with Him. The mystical poets of Spain, St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, draw a distinction between " spiritual espousals" and the ^{et} " spiritual marriage," for which the former is but a preparation. " That which God here communicates to the soul in an instant," says St. Teresa, " is so great a secret and so sublime a grace, and what she feels is such an excessive delight, that I know nothing with which to compare it, except that Our Lord is pleased at that moment to manifest to her the glory which is in Heaven ; and this He does in a more sublime way than by any vision or spiritual delight. More cannot be said (as far as can be understood) than that this soul becomes one with God ; for as He Himself is a spirit, His Majesty is pleased to discover the love He has for us, by making certain persons understand how it extends, in order that we may praise His greatness, because He has vouchsafed to unite Himself to a creature in such a way that, as in the marriage-state husband and wife can no more be separated, so He will never be separated from her." ¹

It would seem that Catherine does not regard the " spiritual marriage," as St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross understand it, ¹ *El Gattijh Interior; Moradas setimas*, cap. **ii.** (Dalton's translation).